



PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALTH

**LESSONS FOR CROSS-SECTOR
COLLABORATION FROM HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES TOGETHER**



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JUNE 2025



Contents

Introduction	5
1. Start with relationships	6
2. Anchor everything in shared purpose	8
3. Plan for change and revisit relationships	10
4. Surface assumptions and align ways of working	12
5. Invest in dedicated partnership capacity	14
6. Clarify governance and share accountability	16
A partnership checklist	18

Introduction

Tackling health inequalities requires new place-based partnerships with organisations and communities across the health system. No single organisation or sector can shift the underlying causes of poor health alone. Meaningful collaboration across the system is essential to understand what matters to communities, to design responses that reflect local realities, and to reach the communities that need services the most.

This need for collaborative working is gaining momentum. Nationally, integrated working is at the heart of efforts to reform the health and care system, with Integrated Care Systems and neighbourhood-based models aiming to better join up services and improve outcomes.

But while new structures and frameworks are important, they won't deliver lasting change on their own. What matters just as much – if not more – are the ways in which people work together: the culture, relationships, and conditions that enable genuine partnership.

Healthy Communities Together (HCT) was a national programme funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, designed to test how stronger partnerships between the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and local health and care organisations could improve health and reduce inequalities.

In Coventry, HCT brought together a cross-sector partnership including Coventry City Council, Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board, Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust, Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire, a VCS organisation, and Willenhall Primary Care Centre. The group worked together over four years in the neighbourhood of Willenhall to explore what it takes to build a more community-led approach to health.

This Partnerships for Health guide draws on that experience. It shares key lessons and practical insights for others interested in working collaboratively or developing cross-sector partnerships – particularly at the neighbourhood level. It provides a set of foundations for more relational, place-based ways of working. The guide explores what helped, what got in the way, and what it really takes to work across boundaries in support of community-led health.

1. Start with relationships



The main work of partnering is the partnership itself. It's about the relationships and the attitude and approach of each person in it."

Effective partnerships are built on trust – and trust is built through relationships. In HCT, some of the strongest moments came when members had invested time in getting to know one another, not just in terms of roles or organisations, but as people. Yet the partnership also experienced the consequences of not making enough space for this at the start.

Driven by a desire to move quickly into delivery, the partnership's early efforts focused on project management and governance before relationships and shared understanding had fully formed. This led to mismatches in expectations, confusion around roles, and moments of misalignment that could have been avoided with a stronger relational foundation.

There were also tensions between those from different sectors: public sector partners sometimes found HCT's informal and emergent culture unfamiliar or even unsettling, while voluntary sector partners were frustrated by perceived risk aversion or process-heavy approaches. Relational work wasn't always valued in the system –

some members noted a cultural pressure to justify time spent on "just talking." But over time, the group came to see that investing in relationships upfront saves time later, especially when facing complexity, disagreement, or change.

Face-to-face contact played an important role. While online meetings make it easy to meet, they can make it difficult to build relationships. It was often in the informal chats, shared meals, and side conversations that trust deepened and tensions softened.

Key lessons from HCT

- Relationships take time and intention. They don't form automatically just because people sit in the same room.
- In cross-sector work, understanding each other's working cultures, motivations, and constraints helps avoid misunderstandings later on.
- When time pressures are high, the instinct is to move fast – but going slow at the start helps you go further in the long run.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Ringfence time at the start:** Dedicate the first 8–12 weeks of a new partnership to relationship-building before launching projects. Include one-to-one conversations, informal gatherings, and a shared “getting to know you” session.
- **Talk about roles and identities:** Ask partners to share what they’re bringing – personally and organisationally – and what success looks like to them.
- **Keep returning to relationships:** Don’t treat this as a one-off phase. Make space to reconnect regularly, especially when people join, leave, or tensions arise.

2. Anchor everything in shared purpose



Commitment has ebbed and flowed, but a shared focus on addressing injustice and inequality in the health system has kept people around the table.”

A shared purpose is the glue that holds cross-sector partnerships together – especially when people, priorities, and pressures inevitably shift. In HCT, partners began with a clear collective ambition: to tackle health inequalities by working differently with communities. This overarching goal helped sustain engagement and focus, even when the details were unclear.

But as the work evolved, we learned that having a shared purpose isn't just about agreeing a vision statement. People bring different interpretations, priorities, and deeply held assumptions to the table – often unconsciously. Underneath the surface of a seemingly clear goal, partners may be pulling in subtly different directions. Some may see the work primarily as a route to improving service delivery, others as a chance to shift power, or as a way to support specific communities. Unless these different motivations are surfaced and explored, they can create confusion, misalignment, or frustration down the line.

In HCT, this surfaced in moments of drift – when the work shifted shape or new people joined without fully understanding its original motivations. Without revisiting the purpose or creating space to explore what people were really trying to achieve, the partnership risked losing coherence. Reconnecting with the “why” helped re-energise commitment and remind partners why the work mattered. A shared purpose doesn't need to be rigid or final, but it must be named, shared, and regularly revisited – especially as the context evolves.

Key lessons from HCT

- A shared purpose gave the partnership cohesion and meaning, but it only worked when it was lived and revisited – not just written down.
- Unspoken or conflicting motivations could pull the work off-course if not surfaced.
- Onboarding new partners was an important moment to reconnect to the origins – and explore what the work meant to each person.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Name the 'why' together:** In your early sessions, co-create a shared purpose – but start by inviting each partner to share their personal motivations and what brought them to the work.
- **Go below the surface:** Make space to explore what people really mean by the purpose, what assumptions they bring, and where interpretations might differ.
- **Keep revisiting and retelling:** Build in regular reflection of your shared purpose over time – and keep telling the story to bring new members into the fold.

3. Plan for change and revisit relationships



We struggled to get to the same place of understanding, at the same time. Things need to be repeated and old ground needed rehearsing and rehashing.”

Change is inevitable in any long-term partnership – but in cross-sector work, it can be especially disruptive. In HCT, the partnership experienced significant churn: staff moved roles, organisations restructured, priorities shifted, and new people joined midstream. And when key people left, continuity and momentum were lost. At times, this made it feel like the partnership was constantly starting over.

One of the most significant disruptions came when Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership Trust (CWPT) entered a major internal reorganisation, significantly reducing their capacity to engage. And the partnership was unprepared for the impact. This led to a prolonged period of disruption, stalled momentum, and a need to reconfigure roles and expectations.

Through this, we learnt that successful partnerships require clear processes for

managing change. This includes onboarding new members, re-establishing shared expectations, and making space to rebuild relationships when needed. It's also essential to build in regular time to surface changing priorities and re-plan collectively, so the partnership can adapt without losing sight of its shared goals.

Key lessons from HCT

- Turnover and change are normal – but without planning, they undermine continuity, trust, and institutional memory.
- New people bring energy and perspective, but they need orientation and space to connect with the work and others.
- Revisiting relationships and purpose regularly helps a partnership stay grounded and responsive over time.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Expect churn:** Assume that people will leave – and build systems to make onboarding easy and relational.
- **Create lightweight handovers:** When someone exits, capture what they were doing, what relationships they held, and any advice for their successor.
- **Induct with stories, not just roles:** Share the partnership's journey and purpose with new members so they understand not just what you do, but why it matters.
- **Reinvest in relationships:** After any major change (e.g. new members, restructure), make space for reconnection – not just realignment.

4. Surface assumptions and align ways of working



Language and framing are a key issue. Different sectors are speaking different languages, so we're having two different conversations about the same thing."

Cross-sector partnerships bring together people from different professions, sectors, and systems – each with their own assumptions about how work should happen. That diversity is one of their greatest strengths – but also a source of tension. In HCT, these differences weren't always obvious at first. But over time, unspoken assumptions about pace, accountability, risk, and roles began to surface – sometimes causing confusion, tension, or misalignment.

Some partners came from systems that emphasised delivery and measurable outputs. Others were used to relational, emergent work that prioritised reflection and responsiveness. These different operating styles shaped how people interpreted key aspects of the work: What does “success” look like? How do decisions get made? How much risk is acceptable?

When these assumptions weren't named or aligned, they created friction. For example, some public sector partners felt uncomfortable with HCT's informality or struggled to reconcile its approach with their own organisational norms. Meanwhile,

some voluntary sector partners found the expectations around evidence, governance, or reporting overly rigid or limiting.

These cultural differences aren't inherently problematic – in fact, we found that they can enrich the work. But they need to be surfaced early and revisited often. In HCT, the most productive moments came when partners were honest about what they needed to feel comfortable, and when the group could adapt ways of working to reflect those needs.

Key lessons from HCT

- Different sectors bring different assumptions, meaning that partners were often operating from very different organisational logics – but didn't always realise it.
- Unspoken tensions can simmer if not addressed – but discussing them openly builds mutual understanding and respect.
- Working through this difference is part of the value of partnership, not a sign of failure.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Talk about working styles early:** Ask each partner what helps them feel safe, engaged, and clear in collaborative work.
- **Name your norms:** Be explicit about how decisions are made, what's expected between meetings, and how feedback will be shared.
- **Adapt together:** Co-design meeting formats, timelines, and communications – don't default to one organisation's style.
- **Check in regularly:** Allow space for friction and use reflection sessions to revisit how the group is working together, not just what it's doing.

5. Invest in dedicated partnership capacity



We've learned more about what is needed from the Programme Manager role as we've prepared for a second recruitment – it's convening more than delivering."

Every partnership needs someone to hold the space. Not just to coordinate logistics or project manage the partnership, but to maintain relationships, prompt reflection, and help the group stay aligned. This allows for other group members to participate more fully. This role could be a dedicated programme manager or convenor, external facilitators, or learning partner.

In HCT, we found that this convening role was essential to the partnership's continuity and depth, even if it wasn't always formally defined. Initially, we had more of a project manager model. But as the programme evolved, the role shifted toward a dedicated convenor – with more focus on holding the health of the partnership itself.

We found that this shift enabled deeper conversations, more inclusive participation, and stronger internal learning. Having someone to guide facilitation, track progress, and liaise with the funder also freed up partners to stay focused on their relationships and shared goals.

We also benefitted from the input of external facilitators, such as from the King's Fund, who supported reflection and learning

across the group. Their independence created space for honest dialogue and helped the partnership see itself more clearly.

Despite its value, the convenor role was not always fully utilised. "If I had this time again, I would have been more adamant about spending time with other organisations," reflected HCT's Programme Manager. Embedding the role more deeply across the partnership – rather than sitting within one organisation – might have helped it reach its full potential.

Key lessons from HCT

- Partnerships need someone to hold the "relational space", not just manage tasks – especially during times of transition or uncertainty.
- Good convenors are emotionally intelligent, reflective, and curious – able to listen, work across boundaries, and gently surface difficult truths when needed.
- External facilitators can bring useful independence, helping partnerships step back, reflect, and learn.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Resource the role explicitly:** Build convening into your budget and governance.
- **Focus on convening:** Think beyond admin and coordination – convenors can support relationships, hold shared purpose, and guide learning and reflection.
- **Embed convener role across the partnership:** Consider rotating or co-holding the role across partners to share ownership and avoid reinforcing one organisation's culture.

6. Clarify governance and share accountability



We didn't have a clear, agreed-upon process for how decisions were made within the partnership."

Successful partnerships need clear, agreed ways of making decisions, sharing power, and staying accountable to each other. At the start of HCT, we were keen to avoid a complicated or overly bureaucratic governance process. But we found that the absence of defined governance structures sometimes led to confusion about how decisions were made and where responsibility sat.

For example, there were points of uncertainty around funding: which decisions should be made collectively, and which were the responsibility of the grant holder? This left the lead partner carrying the weight of delivery and risk, even when decisions had been made by the wider group.

Developing a shared approach to governance and accountability – especially when one organisation holds the contract – is essential. This doesn't mean creating rigid hierarchies or heavy structures. It means being clear about how decisions

are made, who holds which responsibilities, and how the group stays aligned over time. Approaches like co-reporting to funders, shared decision-making protocols, or regular role reviews can help.

Shared accountability also means asking tough but important questions: *Are we doing what we set out to do? Are we each showing up and doing our part?* This kind of reflective governance helps partnerships stay honest, not just organised.

Key lessons from HCT

- When governance and accountability aren't clear, confusion and misalignment can take hold.
- Good governance doesn't need to be complex – just clear, fair, and agreed by everyone.
- Revisiting governance late in the programme clarified roles and helped unlock momentum – but it could have come earlier.



OUR TOP TIPS

- **Define decision-making processes early:** Agree who holds what responsibility for what, as well as how decisions are made.
- **Foster shared leadership:** Create space for multiple voices to lead, guide decision-making, and support alignment – not just formal leads.
- **Build in reflection:** Regularly check in as a group – are we doing what we said we'd do? Are we holding each other well?

A partnership checklist

This checklist pulls together key reflections from across the guide. Use it to review how your partnership is doing – and where you might want to strengthen your approach.

Relationships

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| ☐ Have we spent intentional time building trust – and designed in ways to continue strengthening relationships throughout the work? | ☐ Do we understand each other's working styles, pressures, and motivations? | ☐ Are there unresolved tensions or assumptions we need to surface? |
|--|--|---|

Shared Purpose

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| ☐ Is our shared purpose clear, current, and genuinely shared? | ☐ Have we explored each partner's individual motivations and assumptions – including any unspoken or differing interpretations of the work? | ☐ Do we revisit our purpose regularly – especially when people or priorities change? |
| | | ☐ Can each partner explain how their work connects to the partnership's wider goal? |

Adapting Through Change

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| ☐ Do we have a process for onboarding new members? | ☐ Have we built in time to re-align as people, organisations or roles shift? | ☐ Are we regularly checking who's at the table – and who's missing? |
|---|---|--|

Ways of Working

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| ☐ Have we talked openly about our organisational cultures and expectations? | ☐ Do we know where we differ – and how we'll work with those differences? | ☐ Are we balancing delivery with time for reflection and learning? |
|--|--|---|

Convenor Role

- ☐ Do we have a dedicated convenor role?
- ☐ Is the role embedded across the partnership – not just hosted by one organisation?
- ☐ Are we using that role to its full potential?

Governance & Accountability

- ☐ Are our decision-making processes clear, fair, and shared?
- ☐ Do we know who holds what risks and responsibilities?
- ☐ Is our governance structure proportionate – and does it still serve us well?





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